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Tasso and the Quest for Modern Epic: Goethe's *Torquato Tasso* [and](#) Leopardi's
Operette morali

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Il mondo invecchia,
e invecchiando intristisce.
Tasso, *Aminta*

In the last days of March 1787, Goethe was aboard a ship that crossed the Tyrrhenian sea from Naples towards Palermo. In one of the most well-known passages of the *Italienische Reise*, he tells of how seasickness kept him laying on his berth, while he pondered over the draft of *Torquato Tasso*. 'In Schlaf und Halbtraum setzte ich meine dramatische Plane fort', he writes (WA, 31, p. 84). Goethe's account of the gestation of the play 'im Walfischbauch' lends it a mythical aura. It also links *Tasso* to the transformative experience of the trip to Sicily, which Goethe saw as the culmination of his Italian journey. In Sicily, Goethe found the luxuriant vegetation and enchanted atmosphere of the *Odyssey* – a garden paradise resembling the island of the Phaeacians where the shipwrecked Odysseus finds asylum. While on the island, Goethe started working on a tragedy based on Book 4 of the *Odyssey*. The play, provisionally entitled *Nausikaa*, remained but a plan and, upon his return to Rome, Goethe set his mind to completing *Tasso* instead. Some might think it a shame. *Tasso* is often found lacking in comparison to Goethe's other [dramatic works](#) [plays](#), due to the lack of action and the apparent inconclusiveness of dialogues, which make it hard to infer what the play means to foreground – the poet's on-going struggle for autonomy, or the compromise adumbrated in the conclusion.

In fact, the open-ended dialectic of *Tasso* finds parallels in Goethe's works of the same period, notably the *Lehrjahre*, and more in general can be connected to the post-revolutionary debate about how individual happiness and artistic creativity correlate with the advance of civilization. A key theoretical contribution to that debate is Schiller's essay on naïve and sentimental poetry. As is well known, Schiller's typology corresponds, at least to some extent, to the distinction between ancient and modern poetry. But ultimately, he argues, ~~that~~ poetry is at its most powerful when it unites naïve and sentimental aspects, as demonstrated by four works by Goethe: *Werther*, *Tasso*, the *Lehrjahre* and *Faust* (NA, 20, p. 459). The presence of *Tasso* in this context is significant: instead of grouping the play together with the rest of Goethe's dramatic works, as modern critics do, Schiller links it to texts that have different generic specifications but share the same antithetical mode. Read in this way, *Tasso* is primarily an investigation of the cultural and historical crisis of modernity, embodied by Tasso, the 'sentimental' poet who is engaged in the struggle to write a modern epic.

The concept that epic and modernity have 'an inversely proportional relation'¹ emerged in the late eighteenth century, when a shift in the standards of taste towards naturalness and freedom from formal constraints led to a decisive revision of European literary history. While Italian literature in general was recognized to contain a strong element of nature, the sixteenth-century poet Torquato Tasso fascinated the Romantics for traits that anticipated those of modern poets: a pathological sensibility, extreme self-consciousness, and martyrdom at the hands of a philistine society. Tasso's epic *Gerusalemme liberata* and his pastoral drama *Aminta* were widely read throughout Europe until the early eighteenth century. In *Dichtung und Wahrheit*,

¹ Franco Moretti, *Modern Epic* (London: Verso, 1996), p. 12.

Goethe recalls his father's predilection for Tasso, and how he had memorized parts of the *Befreites Jerusalem* as a child (WA, 26, p. 38). By mid century, however, Tasso's reputation as a poet was on the wane: Ariosto's sprawling universe of deviance and desire was preferred to the sombre religious ideology and hierarchical structure of Tasso's poem. At the same time, the story of Tasso's impossible love for the Princess of Ferrara and consequent madness, popularized by a seventeenth-century biography by Giovanni Battista Manso, began to attract more attention.

In Italy, the quarrel between *tassisti* and *ariostisti* had gone on for over two centuries, but despite that Tasso came to be acknowledged as a national poet on the level of Dante. Today, critics see Tasso as a transitional figure between the triumphant phase of the Renaissance and the culture of control associated with the Counter-Reformation. According to Sergio Zatti, the hardening of Catholic doctrine on the one hand and the rediscovery of Aristotle's *Poetics* on the other placed intolerable restrictions on Tasso, who produced the *Liberata* as a 'formation of compromise' in the Freudian sense. Hence the poem bears traces of an unresolved conflict between unity and multiplicity, truth and fiction, epic and romance.² In view of this, the nature of Goethe's and Leopardi's fascination for Tasso needs to be reassessed, taking into account not only Tasso's romanticized biography but also the complexity of his epic, and the crisis in historical consciousness and aesthetic values it represents. Goethe's play was influential in establishing Tasso as a symbol of the Romantic artist in conflict with his environment. However, it does not employ any of the elements that will later become commonplace: the evil tyrant, the various anecdotes of the poet's madness, and his confinement at Sant'Anna. Leopardi's 'Dialogo di Torquato Tasso e del suo genio familiare' ('Dialogue of Torquato Tasso

² Sergio Zatti, *The Quest for Epic: From Ariosto to Tasso* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2006), pp. 135–59.

and His Guardian Spirit', 1824), part of the collection *Operette morali*, is a surreal conversation between Tasso and the product of his melancholy thoughts, a 'genio' or 'spirit' who delivers no Romantic fantasies but harsh materialist truths. Both texts, as I will show, are concerned in particular with temporality and the impact of historical change on poetic forms, social institutions, and character.

In a note in the *Zibaldone* from March 1821, Leopardi writes: 'La forza creatrice dell'animo appartenente alla immaginazione è esclusivamente propria degli antichi [...] Un Omero, un Ariosto non sono per li nostri tempi, nè, credo, per gli avvenire' ('The creative power of the mind pertaining to the imagination is the exclusive property of the ancients [...] A Homer and a Ariosto are not made for our times or, I believe, for the future').³ Germany and England, he notes, have turned to a new kind of poetry, which is philosophical, self-reflective, and true, as it reflects the more advanced level of knowledge achieved by the moderns. Leopardi calls this 'poesia sentimentale' and pits it against 'poesia immaginativa', which is typical of the ancients. The distinction is a familiar one. It is unclear whether Leopardi knew Schiller's essay directly or only through Staël's *De l'Allemagne*. In any case, what is new is the special significance Leopardi attaches to the Italian contribution to modern poetry, which was still to be made, or completed, at any rate. Italian literature admittedly lagged behind that of Northern nations. However, in a previous phase of modernity it had set the example for the whole of Europe: Leopardi mentions Dante,

³ Giacomo Leopardi, *Zibaldone*, p. 726 (7 March 1821). All references are to the online Italian text at <http://www.leopardi.it/zibaldone.php>, which uses Leopardi's original pagination. English trans. *Zibaldone: The Notebooks of Leopardi*, ed. by Michael Caesar and Franco D'Intino (London: Penguin, 2013). Hereafter abbreviated as *Zib*.

Petrarch and Tasso (and emphatically not Ariosto) as authors of the past who transformed poetry in response to the rupture of modernity. Significantly, Tasso is praised not for any particular thematic or stylistic feature of his poetry, but rather for his awareness of historical change and the way he strove to adapt poetic forms to the new times.

The question of what it means to write poetry today is at the centre of Goethe's play, too. Artistic creation has long been recognized as the fundamental theme of the play, which has sometimes been called a *Künstlerdrama*.⁴ Yet, not enough attention has been given to the work Tasso has just finished writing: the epic *Gerusalemme liberata*. In the opening scene, the Princess and Leonore Sanvitale sit in the garden by the herms of Virgil and Ariosto. Alfons the Duke of Ferrara joins them and eventually Tasso appears on the scene as well, to hand the long-awaited draft of the *Liberata* to his patron. The event is celebrated with an impromptu ceremony: the Princess takes the laurel wreath off Virgil's statue to crown Tasso, but he recoils in shock and begs to be spared from what he calls an 'unverdientes Glück'⁵ (WA, 10, 531). If we read Tasso's reaction in light of late eighteenth-century discussions of the epic system, it signifies more than a generic disaffection with courtly life. It is Virgil's crown, and not Ariosto's, that Tasso receives. Ariosto was not only Tasso's direct antecedent and competitor, but also a poet whom eighteenth-century culture increasingly saw as naïve and 'Homeric' (thought Schiller formed an exception).⁶ Virgil, on the other hand, had rather fallen in the estimation of Goethe

⁴ See Elizabeth M. Wilkinson, 'Torquato Tasso: The Tragedy of the Poet', *PEGS*, 15 (1946), 96–127, now also in *Goethe: Poet and Thinker*, ed. by Elizabeth M. Wilkinson and L. A. Willoughby (London: Edward Arnold, 1962), pp. 75–94. Also Wolfdietrich Rasch, *Goethes "Torquato Tasso": Die Tragödie des Dichters* (Stuttgart: Metzler, 1954), pp. 41–64.

⁵ WA, I, 10, pp. 103–244, here i. 1. 531.

⁶ Friedrich Schiller, *Werke und Briefe*, ed. by Otto Dann et al., 12 vols (Frankfurt/Main: Deutscher Klassiker Verlag, 1988–2004), VIII: *Theoretische Schriften*, ed. Rolf-Peter Janz (1992), pp. 706–810 (pp. 729–32).

Commented [KH1]: Perhaps, but one notable exception was Schiller: see *Über naive und sentimentalische Dichtung* (FA 8, 729–32), where the 'sentimental' Ariosto is contrasted with the 'naive' Homer. – Perhaps a bracket at the end of the sentence? '[...] "Homeric" (though Schiller formed an exception).' The corresponding footnote would read: 'Friedrich Schiller, *Werke und Briefe*, ed. by Otto Dann et al., 12 vols (Frankfurt/Main: Deutscher Klassiker Verlag, 1988–2004), VIII: *Theoretische Schriften*, ed. Rolf-Peter Janz (1992), pp. 706–810 (pp. 729–32).'

and other German writers of his generation. In *Laokoon*, Lessing calls Virgil ‘der witzige Hofmann’ (the witty courtier), and comments on how his status as a court poet and his obligations towards Augustus interfered with his artistic choices.⁷ This is precisely the kind of fate Goethe’s Tasso is anxious to avoid for himself.

Commented [KH2]: Footnote: There are 12 vols in 14 in the Lessing ed. *Laokoon* is in vol. 5/2. Please give the full range of pages for the text, and then the page number for the quotation in brackets. See MHRA Style Guide, 11.2.

However, Tasso eventually kneels down and accepts his crown. At this point, as he does elsewhere in the play in moments of difficulty, Tasso flees the present and takes refuge in the imagination. As Elizabeth Wilkinson has noted, in such instances we see the poet at work, seizing on an idea and expanding it into a ‘phantasy of universal appeal’.⁸ Tasso pictures himself alone ‘im tiefen Hein’, and imagines seeing his own reflection in the mirror of clear waters, Narcissus-like: ‘Wer mag der Abgeschiedne sein?’ he would ask, not recognizing himself. In his fantasy, Tasso has died and gone to Elysium, which in classical mythology is the abode of the righteous and the heroic:

O säh’ ich die Heroen, die Poeten

Der alten Zeit um diesen Quell versammelt!

O säh’ ich sie immer unzertrennlich,

Wie sie im Leben fast verbunden waren! (l. 3. 545–48).

Tellingly, it is not the couple Virgil-Aeneas Tasso wishes to meet, but Homer with Achilles and Odysseus. In this ancient paradise, poet and hero exist in a symbiotic relationship, bound by the same ‘Streben’. But as Tasso is lost in reverie, a new guest arrives.

Antonio Montecatino, the Duke’s secretary of state, has just returned from a diplomatic mission in Rome and strides confidently into the scene. He brings good news: the quarrel between Ferrara and the papacy has been resolved, and friendly

⁷ Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, *Laokoon*, in *Werke und Briefe*, ed. by Wilfried Barner et al., [12 vols in 14](#) (Frankfurt/Main: Deutscher Klassiker Verlag, 1985), [v/ii](#), pp. [9–206](#) (p. 109).

⁸ Wilkinson, ‘Torquato Tasso’, p. 86.

relations restored. Tasso is as impressed as everyone else, and his words to Antonio are full of humble admiration: ‘Ich hoffe, mich der Nähe | Des vielerfahrenen Mannes auch zu freun’ (I. 4. 581–2). Still immersed in his daydream, Tasso sees in Antonio the fulfillment of his wish: a present-day hero he can actually befriend, who will impart some Homeric swagger to his epic. He calls Antonio ‘vielerfahr[en]’, literally ‘much-experienced’. Perhaps the *Odyssey* was not far from Goethe’s mind even after he had abandoned the plan for *Nausikaa*. ‘Vielerfahr[en]’ is certainly an allusion to ‘polytropos’ (literally ‘of many turns’), the first [attribute](#) Homer applies to Odysseus. Antonio’s ability to pull off a deal with the Pope suggests that he possesses Odysseus’s qualities of resourcefulness and cunning bordering on deceit – prized characteristics for a courtier in the age of dissimulation. Like Odysseus, Antonio has the gift of foresight and knows how to combine experience and expectation to adapt to [a](#) changeful time. As he says to Alfons, intelligence is not enough to succeed in the world of politics: ‘Vieles traf zusammen, | Das ich zu unserm Vorteil nutzen konnte’ (I. 4. 601–2). Antonio has Odysseus’ sense of *kairos*, the propitious moment for action, and what Machiavelli calls ‘virtù’, understood as the capacity to seize the occasion and bend Fortune to one’s will.

Antonio’s multilayered speech invokes both the ancient heroic ethos dear to Tasso and modern theories of state power such as Machiavelli’s. He praises Pope Gregory XIII for his efficient, far-sighted government:

Es ist kein schönrer Anblick in der Welt,
 Als einen Fürsten sehn, der klug regiert,
 Das Reich zu sehn, wo jeder stolz gehorcht,
 Wo jeder sich nur selbst zu dienen glaubt,
 Weil ihm das Rechte nur befohlen wird (I. 4. 639–43).

Antonio's reasoning here draws on another facet of Machiavelli's concept of *virtù*, namely prudence, defined as 'habitually considering ordinary humours, desires, and reactions of others as "necessary" constraints on their own field of action'.⁹ So a wise prince should be able to manipulate the self-interest of his subjects rather than repress it. Clearly, this definition puts the very concept of virtue under strain. In Antonio's speech we hear the vocabulary of classical republicanism (the concept of *virtù* and *fortuna*) being twisted to fit in the new political realities of princely rule. But Tasso does not immediately perceive the new meanings under the old words, and mistakes the Staatsekretär Antonio for an hero in the ancient mould. Antonio's words and their reverberations on Tasso's mind suggest that the breakdown of humanist ideals in the late Renaissance period is one of the main drivers of Goethe's interest in the life and times of Tasso. In other words, the historical setting of *Tasso* allowed Goethe to explore the rupture between antiquity and modernity from three distinct viewpoints: Renaissance humanism and its revival of ancient culture; the decline of civic liberties in sixteenth-century Italy (Tasso's present); and Goethe's own classicist enterprise in the 1780s.

Antonio's speech raises questions about the cleavage between personal morality and social norms, and between value and activity. These are confronted directly in Tasso's evocation of the Golden Age. At the beginning of Act 2, Tasso and the Princess are alone on the scene. She invites him to lower his expectations and learn to appreciate the companionship of others ('Gesellschaft') despite their flaws, instead of seeking to recreate 'die goldne Zeit' (II. 1. 975). The phrase strikes Tasso well beyond the Princess' intention. Employing a variety of classical and Renaissance motifs, he laments the passing of the Golden Age, when the earth was 'free' and the

⁹ Erica Benner, *Machiavelli's Ethics* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2009), p. 152.

only law for mankind was: ‘Erlaubt ist, was gefällt’ (II. 1. 994), that is, there was no contradiction between pleasure (‘was gefällt’) and moral principles (‘was erlaubt ist’).¹⁰ The Princess’s reply is a pragmatic one: there never was such a time, because a just society can only survive if natural impulses are held in check by the laws of decorum and morality (‘was sich ziemt’, II. 1. 1006). Her argument is meant to anchor morality to a sounder basis than personal sensibility, but Tasso objects that if we cannot rely on our inner moral compass to sanction wrong behaviour, society will inevitably descend into a kind of barbarism where the only law is personal gain (‘was [...] nützlich ist’, II. 1. 1010). Their conversation echoes Antonio’s praise for the Pope in Act 1. Asked if the Pope acts as patron to the arts, Antonio had replied that arts and sciences are valued in Rome only insofar as they are useful:

Er ehrt die Wissenschaft, sofern sie nutzt,

Den Staat regieren, Völker kennen lehrt:

Er schätzt die Kunst, sofern sie ziert [...] (I. 4. 665–9).

In this earlier passage, Antonio takes a purely instrumental approach to human creativity that undermines the idea of its intrinsic value dangerously ‘nutzen’ with ‘ziemen’. Later, when the Princess uses concept of ‘ziemen’ to debunk the myth of the Golden Age, Tasso sees her line of reasoning converging with Antonio’s. Effectively, ‘was sich ziemt’ is the same as ‘was nutzt’: societal norms inspired by reason and not by nature make humanity vulnerable to corruption and abuse. At this point, Tasso realizes that his ideal of autonomy in a free, natural society finds no supporters at court.

Commented [KH3]: Give reference.

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Commented [KH5]: But the quotation has ‘zieren’, not ‘ziemen’?

¹⁰ ‘S’ei piace, ei lice’ (‘If it pleases, it is allowed’) is a line taken from the chorus ‘O bella età dell’oro’ (‘O happy Golden Age’) in Tasso’s *Aminta* (1573). The Princess answers with a quote from Giambattista Guarini’s *Pastor fido* (1590): ‘Piaccia, se lice’ (‘Let that please, which is allowed’).

Throughout the first half of the play we hear Tasso thinking in categories derived from ancient culture that are not appropriate to the new age of state power. At the end of Act 2, Goethe dramatizes the moment when Tasso becomes fully aware of this displacement – the moment when, to use Leopardi's words, Tasso felt 'il cangiamento dell'uomo' ('the change in man', *Zib.* 727). According to Rasch, Tasso's failure to befriend Antonio is the consequence of an objective historical situation in which 'die Einheit der Welt ist bedroht, ihre Widersinnigkeit tritt hervor, wo Held und Dichter, Tat und Wort einander entfremdet sind und feindlich auseinandertreten'.¹¹

Yet the way Goethe illuminates this historical shift is by showing how external circumstances act on individuals and transform their subjective characteristics.

Neither the court nor any other external force prevents Tasso and Antonio from reaching a mutual understanding. The change has taken place within them: Antonio is no more an epic hero than Tasso is a naïve poet. Tasso imagines that to be involved in public life is to be at the centre of a world 'die sich lebendig, rastlos, ungeheuer | Um einen großen, einzig klugen Mann, | Gemessen dreht' (II. 1. 791–30). But the hero giving order and direction to reality is a far cry from the politics of intrigue and negotiation in which Antonio operates. Conversely, Antonio is wrong to think of Tasso as a 'Müßiggänger' who enjoys careless freedom and an undisturbed communion with nature as a court poet. Writing for Tasso is a painstaking process of constant rethinking and revisions, and even 'der Lorbeer...und die Gunst der Frauen' that Antonio is jealous of have become a burden (III. 4. 2020).

Tasso's self-conscious, doubt-ridden persona correspond to that of the modern sentimental poet as defined by Schiller and Leopardi. Yet for the most part of the play we see him engaged in discussions about society and relationships rather than writing

¹¹ Rasch, *Torquato Tasso*, p. 118.

Commented [KH6]: ? Do you mean: A. isn't an epic hero, and Tasso isn't a naïve poet (they merely think this of the other)? If that is what you mean, a better phrasing might be: 'Antonio is no more an epic hero than Tasso is a naïve poet.'

poetry. To be sure, representing artistic creation ‘live’ on stage poses a technical challenge.¹² Yet Tasso’s preoccupation with the dynamics of court power also goes to show how creativity correlates to forms of government and organization of social life. A fuller presentation of this argument is found in Hegel’s lectures on aesthetics. Moving from the premise that naïve poetry has a real foundation only in primitive societies, Hegel reasons that that opposite mode of existence is found in ‘developed states’. In such states ‘the essence of ethical life, i.e. justice and its rational freedom, has already been worked out and preserved in the form of a *legal* regime’. ‘This regime’ he continues, ‘exists as an inflexible necessity, independent of particular individuals and their personal mentality and character’.¹³ The coming of the state puts an end to the age of heroes and epic poetry; the life of a society and its unfolding in historical time are no longer shaped by the concrete action of heroic individualities. Now individual subjects, be they civil servants or artists, are subordinated to whatever limited task is prescribed to them by the state apparatus. In this sense, both Ferrara and the Papal States are ‘modern states’ where morality and the law, and even art and poetry, are a matter for the public authority to legislate upon. The only choice for individuals is to conform, whether they do so by coercion (as Tasso) or because, like Antonio, they recognize the rationality and justice of the state. It thus becomes clear why Goethe’s interest in the figure of Tasso is not focused on the dramatic incidents of his life at court, which Goethe seems determined to underplay. Tasso interests him because in his work he sees the product of uncertain times similar to his own, when rapid social and political transformations project a sense of delay and anachronism onto the aesthetic field. A precocious talent, Tasso casts his lot with a genre – the epic – which, although still prestigious, is in deep crisis. He is thus charged not only with

¹² See Wilkinson, ‘Torquato Tasso’, p. 76.

¹³ Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art*, trans. by T.M. Knox (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), vol. 1, p. 182.

writing an epic that would please his patrons, but with the titanic task of putting art back in synch with social experience. An unlikely hero, Tasso's figure allows Goethe to bring into focus a set of connected issues around the role of poetry in modern societies. These are, on an ascending scale of generalization, the historicization of the epic, the detachment of personal from collective morality, and the problem of happiness.

A similar combination of concerns brings Leopardi to Tasso in the 1820s. Leopardi had been a *tassista* since an early age, and the influence of both the *Aminta* and the *Liberata* on the *Canti* is well documented.¹⁴ Until then, however, he had looked to Tasso primarily for matters of language and style, according to the prevalent critical opinion that valued Tasso for his eloquence. A group of extended entries on epic poetry in the *Zibaldone* prepare the composition of the 'Dialogo' in June 1824. As for the German Romantics, the problem for Leopardi is the impracticability of the epic in modern times. Homer is the benchmark to which later poets are compared: Virgil, Dante, Ariosto, Camões, Ossian, and most frequently Tasso. A distinction emerges with some regularity between Homer and Ariosto on one side, and Virgil and Tasso on the other. The grounds of the comparison can be summarized as follows. The *Aeneid* and the *Liberata* are not original works because their subject matter is taken respectively from the *Iliad* and *Orlando furioso*. Neither Aeneas nor Goffredo, the leader of the Christian army in the *Liberata*, are real heroes in the Homeric sense;

¹⁴ See Alessandro Tortoreto, 'Leopardi e Tasso', in *Leopardi e la letteratura italiana dal duecento al seicento: Atti del IV Convegno internazionale di studi leopardiani* (Florence: Olschki, 1978), pp. 291–337; and Lynne Press, 'Leopardi's Tasso: An Elective Affinity', *Journal of the Institute of Romance Studies*, 5 (1997), 1–10.

they are too pious and scrupulous, too human to be really great. Homer and Ariosto came before the rules of the epic poem or made their own rules; Virgil and Tasso understood genre in too prescriptive a manner. Furthermore, Tasso's epic is not strictly 'national' (i.e. Italian) but European or Christian in a wider sense (*Zib.* 3095-3167, 5–11 August 1823). As we have seen, a negative view of Virgil was common in Germany, and Goethe too aligned Tasso with Virgil to indicate Tasso's distance from the Homeric standard. It was, however, rather unconventional among Italian literati, who continued to acknowledge Virgil as master and guide in the tradition of Dante.

Leopardi considers the *Aeneid* and the *Liberata* to be the product of a 'civiltà provetta', a mature civilization similar to his own, where citizens are excluded from public decision-making and the government of the state (*Zib.* 4476, 29 March 1829). Leopardi's ideas on the historical evolution of societies derive in part from Vico and in part from Rousseau. With the latter he shares the belief that the ideal public realm can only be realized in 'small nations' such as the Greek polis or early Republican Rome, where all free men gathered in a sovereign assembly. But as human societies grew larger and more complex, so the government of the state became a specialized task performed by a proportionally smaller group of people, who eventually concentrate all power in their hands.¹⁵ For Leopardi, the people of Imperial Rome and that of modern Europe,

Divenendo stranieri alla cosa pubblica, sono anche divenuti stranieri alla propria storia. Se però si può chiamare lor propria una storia che non è di popolo ma di principi [...]. In siffatti stati, gli eroi delle leggende popolari non sono altri che Santi o innamorati: argomenti, al più, di novelle, non di poemi o canti eroici. (As the peoples have become strangers to public affairs, so they have become strangers to their own history. If, that is, you can call their own what is a history of princes, not of peoples [...]. In such states, the only heroes of popular legends are Saints or lovers: subjects, at most, most, for novels, not heroic poems or songs (*Zib.* 4475, 30 March 1829)).

Commented [KH7]: Reference?

¹⁵ See Cesare Luporini, *Leopardi progressivo* (Rome: Editori Riuniti, 1980), pp. 35–40.

So Tasso should really be writing a novel. As the subject of a princely state in the twilight of the Renaissance, Tasso represents for Leopardi the quintessentially modern poet, who, despite his talent, cannot fully overcome the inconsistencies between ancient form and the reality of contemporary social life and reading public. The fault is not individual but systemic: the formal structure and implied ideology of the epic genre are misplaced in the 'mature civilization' of late sixteenth-century Italy, and Tasso's attempt to write a serious, heroic epic according to modern sensibilities is doomed to artistic failure.

For Leopardi in the *Zibaldone*, as for Goethe, Tasso's life becomes an allegory of his own condition not as an individual, but as a poet in relation to his time. Yet, the 'Dialogo' contains nothing of the historical framework and makes no reference to Tasso's activity as a poet. The tone is humorous, and is applied to a fundamentally serious treatment of a series of questions about human psychology. Tasso's 'genio familiare' asks three questions: 'what is truth?', 'what is pleasure?', [and](#) 'what is boredom?' The result is a diabolic version of the Socratic dialogue, by which Tasso is led to recognize the ultimate meaninglessness of existence. Tasso's voice is prone to elegiac contemplation and melancholy, while the spirit resembles the type of 'der paradoxe Praktiker, der ironische Engel'. The definition is Walter Benjamin's, who thus described the two halves of Leopardi's poetic personality in his 1928 review of the *Operette morali*.¹⁶ The dialogue clearly takes place after Tasso has been banished from the court, as he finds himself in a bare cell, with nothing but the voices inside his head to keep him company. There, time becomes a problem in a very real psychological sense, for Tasso is besieged by boredom.

¹⁶ Quoted in Nicholas Rennie, *Speculating on the Moment: The Poetics of Time and Recurrence in Goethe, Leopardi, and Nietzsche* (Göttingen: Wallstein, 2005), p. 140 [n. 46](#).

‘A me pare che la noia sia della natura dell’aria’, Tasso opines, ‘la quale riempie tutti gli spazi interposti alle altre cose materiali [...] Così tutti gl’intervalli della vita umana frapposti ai piaceri e ai dispiaceri, sono occupati dalla noia’ (I think that boredom is of the same nature as the air, which fills all the spaces between material things [...]). Thus, in human life all intervals between pleasure and pain are occupied by boredom.)

Whenever the mind is unoccupied, boredom moves in and fills the space like a toxic fume. The spirit clarifies the concept further: ‘Veramente per la noia non credo si debba intendere altro che il desiderio puro della felicità; non soddisfatto dal piacere, e non offeso apertamente dal dispiacere’ (‘Actually, I believe that by boredom we must understand the pure desire for happiness, which is neither satisfied by pleasure nor openly offended by pain’).¹⁷ If we have nothing to distract us, no memory, no expectation, no present feeling of pleasure or pain to dwell upon, our consciousness fixes itself on the chronic dissatisfaction that is inscribed in human nature.

In the same entry of the *Zibaldone* where he deals with imaginative and sentimental poetry, Leopardi also discusses the dangers of boredom particularly to the Italian mind. The reason why modern Italian literature is so bad is that, on top of having lost the natural gift of imagination like other civilized nations, Italians make terrible sentimental poets. And boredom is to blame: ‘In quest’ozio, in questa noia [...] senza né patria né guerre né carriere civili o letterarie né altro oggetto di azioni o di pensieri costanti, l’italiano non è capace di sentir nulla profondamente, né difatto egli sente nulla’ (‘In the midst of this idleness, this boredom...without a homeland, wars, civil or literary careers, or other objects of constant thought or activity, the Italian is not capable of feeling anything deeply, and in fact he feels nothing’, 729–30, 8 March 1821). So boredom can become a political problem. Due to the political fragmentation of the peninsula, Italians lack a national arena for culture and a nation

¹⁷ Leopardi, *Operette morali: Essays and Dialogues*, trans. by Giovanni Cecchetti (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982), p. 176.

state in which to invest their energies. As a consequence, they are untouched by passions such as love of country, civic virtue, honour or even, to use Rousseau's phrase, *amour-propre*. Strictly speaking, all these things are illusions, state-sanctioned suspensions of disbelief that have no rational basis. Because boredom grants them immunity from passions, the Italians see through the fiction that underpins all 'imagined communities', and do not join in.¹⁸ In a complete reversal of the Romantic stereotype, Leopardi depicts the Italian character as wholly disaffected and unfeeling, behaving in a purely rational, that is selfish, manner. As in the lawless society described by Goethe's Tasso, in Italy 'jeder glaubt, | Es sei auch schicklich, was ihm nützlich ist' (II. 1. 1009–10). But in 1821, Leopardi admired Tasso as someone who had felt the decline of imaginative literature, and still managed to write poetry that 'interested' the readers of his time – in other words, he did not succumb to 'noia' (*Zib.* 4388–89). His fate is more uncertain in the 'Dialogue'.

The spirit does offer Tasso at least a meagre consolation: boredom itself is subject to time, and as the mind grows used to receiving less stimuli, the excitement threshold lowers. In a way, Tasso's isolation is a good thing because it will gradually reset his jaded sensibility and eventually erase the knowledge acquired through experience. At the beginning of the dialogue Tasso lamented the fact that 'l'uso del mondo, e l'esercizio de' patimenti, sogliono come profundare e sopire dentro a ciascuno di noi quel primo uomo che egli era' ('familiarity with the world and the endurance of suffering tend to push under and deaden inside each one of us that man he used to be', p. 166). Now the spirit tells him: 'la solitudine fa quasi l'ufficio della gioventù; o certo ringiovanisce l'animo, ravvalora e rimette in opera l'immaginazione, e rinnuova nell'uomo sperimentato i beneficii di quella prima

¹⁸ For Leopardi's ideas on the asociality of Italians see *Discorso sopra lo stato presente del costume degl'italiani*, in *Opere*, vol. 2, pp. 661–95.

inesperienza che tu sospiri' ('Solitude almost performs the same function as youth; it certainly rejuvenates one's spirit, strengthens and gives new vigor to the power of the imagination, and in the experience it renews the benefits of that first inexperience for which you yearn', p. 180). It is Tasso's luck in his misfortune that ~~seclusion~~ captivity ends up undoing the effects of experience, which is what causes boredom. Leopardi argues, following Vico, that the ages of man recapitulate the epochs of human history, so that in our youth we are closer to the imaginative, active life of the ancients. Boredom instead is a modern passion caused by a untempered use of reason that destroys all illusions, even those that are beneficial to life such as love – love for others, love of country, self-love.¹⁹ The ancients, the spirit observes, knew the value of untruths and sought the respite offered by dreams: 'Però non sono da condannare gli antichi [...] se ebbero per costume di procurare in vari modi la dolcezza e la giocondità dei sogni [...] così non trovando mai la felicità nel tempo della vigilia, si studiavano di essere felici dormendo' ('The ancients [...] should not be condemned for their custom of seeking in various ways the sweetness and pleasure of dreams [...] As they couldn't find happiness during their waking hours, they tried to be happy while they slept' (p. 170)). Anything that disrupts the working of the rational mind (dreams, alcohol, Tasso's own insanity) can bring temporary relief of pain, which is the closest one can ever get to happiness. So Tasso's madness paradoxically is his cure – certainly from boredom, and perhaps also from the trap of modern consciousness. But the palingenesis granted to Tasso is a modest one: it is found 'in qualche liquore generoso' ('in some generous liquor', p. 182) and cannot take him back to the full light of day, but only part of the way to the moment before the day ends. 'La tua conversazione mi riconforta pure assai', he thanks the spirit. 'Non che

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¹⁹ See *Zibaldone*, pp. 618–20 (6 February 1821).

ella interrompa la mia tristezza: ma questa per la più parte del tempo è come una notte oscurissima, senza luna né stelle; mentre son teco, somiglia al bruno dei crepuscoli, piuttosto grato che molesto' ('Talking to you is of great comfort to me. Not that it stems the tide of my depression, which most of the time is like an extremely black night, without moon or stars; but while I am with you, it's more like the darkness of twilight – pleasant rather than oppressive', p. 182).

In a recent book, Franco D'Intino has proposed that the *Operette morali* are best understood as Leopardi's attempt at a 'modern epic'. He borrows the concept from Franco Moretti's book with the same title, which is a study of *Faust* and other monumental works of world literature since the nineteenth century. D'Intino argues that by calling his essays 'moralì', Leopardi signals his intention to restore the 'epic function' of literature – that is, its role as guide for action. The diminutive form 'operette' indicates his awareness of the limits of such enterprise.²⁰ The key, according to D'Intino, is in a Platonic distrust for the written word and in the sense of impermanence of modern culture that Leopardi and Goethe would share. What his argument shows, I think, is that the category of modernity in itself has little analytical power. The game of regression can take us back from the eighteenth century to the Renaissance (aptly 'the early modern'), to the invention of script. What we should look for instead are the specific structures of thinking, feeling, writing that are successively identified as 'modern', and investigated historically. Goethe and Leopardi both find the modern in Tasso's 'formation of compromise' between epic heroism and the prose of the world, civic virtue and individualism, mentality and reality. The compromise is by definition an unsatisfying one, but it is just enough to prevent the sentimental mind from hurtling towards self-destruction. Leopardi can

²⁰ Franco D'Intino, *L'immagine della voce: Leopardi, Platone e il libro morale* (Venice: Marsilio, 2009), p. 179.

perhaps help shed light on the notoriously ambiguous ending of Goethe's *Tasso*. In the rapid movement of the 'Dialogo', a revolution takes place in Tasso's mind that makes a *tabula rasa* of the consciousness. With ruthless honesty, the spirit tells him: 'Il piacere è un subbietto speculativo, e non reale; un desiderio, e non un fatto; un sentimento che l'uomo concepisce col pensiero, e non prova, o per dir meglio, un concetto, e non un sentimento' ('Pleasure is a theoretical subject, not a real one; a desire, not a fact; some sort of feeling man conceives in his mind but does not experience; or, to be more exact, a concept, not a feeling', p. 172). The entire contents of the mind are overwritten as untrue because they are not based on sensory experience, and replaced with more [beneficial](#), if equally illusory, ideas about the desirability of life and human society. The sacrifice of the apperceptive self is the only way to regain a form of integration that approximates the naïve. In an earlier and probably his most famous poem, 'L'infinito' (1819), Leopardi uses the image of foundering ('naufragar') to describe the disintegration of subjectivity that puts an end to desire:

[...] Così tra questa
immensità s'annega il pensier mio:
E il naufragar m'è dolce in questo mare.

([...] So amid this
immensity my own thought is drowned:
and foundering feels good in such a sea. (13-15))

The image does not appear in the 'Dialogue', which can be said to reflect a more advanced phase of Leopardi's theory of pleasure. There, the metaphorical shipwreck of the self is avoided thanks to the recuperation of illusions, understood as psychic

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products that gratify the impulse towards pleasure (so effectively thanks to Tasso's approaching madness).

Goethe's *Tasso* closes on the imagery of shipwreck, too, but there is nothing peaceful about it. It is actually pretty terrifying, and Tasso has no desire to drown: 'Zerbrochen ist das Steuer, und es kracht | Das Schiff an allen Seiten...Ich fasse dich mit beiden Armen an!' The shipwreck is Tasso's moment of *anagnorisis*, when he recognizes things as they stand between him and the court and reappraises his relationship with his former antagonist Antonio. The discovery makes ~~a tabula rasa~~ clear break with previous beliefs and challenges Tasso's sense of his own self: 'Ich kenne mich in der Gefahr nicht mehr', Tasso confesses. As for the Leopardi of 'L'infinito', shipwreck stands for the dissolution of mental reality and of subjective self-awareness. But Tasso flinches, and Antonio comes to the rescue. He urges the younger poet to look about himself and seek his own self in the exchange with other people: 'Vergleiche dich! Erkenne, was du bist!'. This is perhaps the rock ('Felsen') Tasso clammers onto to save himself in the very last line. Tasso is invited to recognize the importance of a life of relations and of sharing thoughts and dreams with others. The new basis for modern identity, not just for the poet but for humanity at large, must be not self-reflective mental activity but sociability. Since, as the audience knows, ~~Knowing that~~ Tasso is going to spend the next seven years in prison, Antonio's advice smacks of irony. But there the play ends, with no insight on what is to happen after. But if we move to Leopardi's absurdist 'Dialogo', there we find a more congenial place to think through the paradox: if it is madness and not rationality that leads to virtue, it is only natural that from isolation a new imaginary community will spring. And is not that the purpose of the epic?

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